

BEHLER AWARD



Shi Haitao, 2019 Behler Turtle Conservation Award Honoree

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This year's prestigious 14th Annual Behler Turtle Conservation Award, generally considered the "Nobel Prize" for turtle conservation and research, honored Professor Shi Haitao, China's preeminent turtle ecologist and conservationist. Shi has passionately dedicated his career to studying China's turtles and tortoises and working to prevent their extinction.

Shi began his career in turtle ecology and conservation in the late 1980s as a graduate student working on the Central Asian Tortoise (*Agrionemys horsfieldii*) in the remote and arid region of Xinjiang Province, in western China. This project was the first true ecological study focused on turtles in China. Although field conditions were tough, this project sparked a fire in him that burns brightly to this day. Shi's passion for turtles can be seen from his lab and field research to his advocacy efforts for improved conservation policies and protection. In addition to his early work, he has also studied the ecology and life history of nearly one third of the native Chinese turtles. Most notable are surveys he and his students have pursued searching for the nearly extinct Yangtze Giant Softshell Turtle (*Rafetus swinhoei*), the in-depth ecological work on the Four-eyed Turtle (*Sacalia quadriocellata*), and confirming the existence of a distinctive population of the Vietnamese Black-breasted Leaf Turtle (*Geoemyda spengleri*) on Hainan Island.

Professor Shi's early work with turtle research was the first of its kind in China, paving the way for others to study turtles. Most current turtle biologists in China are former students of Professor Shi and his research team at Hainan Normal University



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(HNU). The turtle research team at HNU has comprised over 50 members, including eight staff, 12 Ph.D. students, and numerous Masters and undergraduate students. These former students have gone on to careers in various fields, including establishing their own turtle research labs at other institutions.

Not only is Professor Shi a pioneering turtle researcher in China, but he is also a pioneer in advocating for their legal protection under the Chinese Wildlife Law. In 2003, he wrote the Action Plan for the conservation of turtles in China, working tirelessly along with his team to fulfill the goals set forth in that Action Plan. Research and boots on the ground conservation are important, but Professor Shi realized that without policy in place to protect turtles, the research would be in vain. Through his efforts, the government has listed roughly one third of native turtle species on their current wildlife protection list, and for the new list currently under revision, roughly 90% of Chinese species will be listed and offered protection. Shi has also helped train officers on proper identification of species, without which enforcement is most difficult. This training led him to write the book, *Identification Manual for Turtle Conservation in China*. The book includes 31 native and 95 non-native traded turtle species which could be found in China at that time. To date, he has donated over 7,000 copies to various national and international governments and NGOs. To broaden his outreach efforts, he also established the Biodiversity Museum of Hainan, which includes a section specifically devoted to tortoises, and founded the Eco-Environmental Education Center in Hainan Province, with more than 700,000 visitors to date. He also led research efforts to document the scope and enormous scale of turtle farming in China, and discovered that farms were intentionally producing hybrid turtles for the high-end pet trade.

Through the constant long-term efforts of Shi's team and many associated par-



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ties, turtle protection legislation in China has been strengthened and the awareness of government officials and the public of the need for protection of turtles has been improved. This has resulted in an increase in confiscations and enforcement against illegal farming operations. Shi has advocated for continued efforts to make turtles an important object of protection rather than consumption, and to gradually restore the richness of turtles in China.

It is not often you get to meet a pioneer in any professional area and have the honor to work with them, but one of us (Gailard) has had the recent honor to work with Professor Shi, and the other (Rhodin) has known him since 1999 when they met at the Asian Turtle Trade workshop in Cambodia which served as the opening salvo in the global struggle to protect China's and Asia's dwindling turtle populations. Both of us and

other students and colleagues have caught the ember of Professor Shi's passion for turtle conservation and have continued to work together to create change. Professor Shi's ability to recruit, train, and inspire students and other professional colleagues is one of the most important aspects of his accomplishments.

In his acceptance speech for the Behler Award, Shi said, "although China has been a cause of the turtle extinction crisis, it is also part of the solution" and urged the global conservation community to work together to save turtles from extinction in the wild. He has been the driving force for turtle conservation in China and his efforts are effecting real change. He deserves the highest accolades and recognition for his accomplishments to date, and strengthened support for his efforts going forward.